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This guest blog post comes to us from [Joel Hernandez](#) (<https://twitter.com/joelhdz>). Joel is an intern at the [Migration Policy Institute](#) (<http://www.migrationpolicy.org/>), and a graduate of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, with a focus on International Law and Humanitarianism and a background in legal assistance and advocacy on behalf of migrants and refugees. This post is based on his experience working on the Greek island of Lesbos in July and August of 2015.

Molyvos is a town of less than 2,000 on the Greek island of Lesbos, lying in plain sight of Turkey's Çanakkale Province across a narrow finger of the Aegean Sea. Thus far in 2015, Lesbos Island, population 85,000, has received [almost 100,000 refugees and migrants from Syria, Afghanistan, and other countries \(33,000 in August alone\)](#) (<http://greece.greekreporter.com/2015/08/24/amnesty-international-refugees-in-lesvos-are-facing-dreadful-conditions/>). Lesbos's northern coast allows the shortest crossing from Turkey on the way toward northern Europe and receives the largest number of landings. Yet arriving refugees are greeted not by local police, nor by professional humanitarians. They are met by an [odd and evolving crew](#) (http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/08/world/europe/tourists-on-greek-island-join-local-volunteers-to-aid-refugees.html?_r=0) of aspiring humanitarians, local volunteers, and ['voluntourists'](#) (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/migrant-crisis-in-greece-dutch-couple-holidaying-in-lesbos-cancel-flight-home-to-help-refugees-10447027.html>). One would be hard pressed to find a copy of the [Sphere Handbook](#) (<http://www.sphereproject.org/>) in Lesbos—much less a volume on [International Humanitarian Law](#) (https://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/other/what_is_ihl.pdf)—yet the principles underlying these texts are as present on the island as the [weight of the humanitarian crisis](#) (<http://www.irinnews.org/report/101926/here-today-gone-tomorrow>) befalling it. [In the absence of a more robust institutional response](#) (<http://newint.org/features/web-exclusive/2015/07/21/greece-aid-lesvos/>), Molyvos is, at the moment, the site of humanitarianism without humanitarians.

Asked why she does what she does, Melinda McRostie [brings up a story of starfish](#) (https://youtu.be/t_T2wKKSTDU?t=6m5s). A little girl walking by the beach sees thousands of starfish washed up on shore and begins throwing them back into the sea. An old man sees her and asks why—there are far too many starfish for her to rescue by herself. The little girl picks up a starfish and holds it up: "I've saved this one." McRostie, owner of the Captain's Table, a popular Molyvos seaside restaurant, distributes up to three basic meals per day to the hundreds of refugees who arrive daily from Turkey and end up in Molyvos. She has become a de facto humanitarian and one of the main relief providers in Lesbos. McRostie leads the distribution of food and water, as well as clothes, toys, and shoes, to arriving refugees. The small reception area she maintains on rented land behind her restaurant, offers refugees shade, privacy, and a measure of dignity following their arrival to Greece. [Help for refugees in Molyvos](#) (<https://www.facebook.com/HelpForRefugeesInMolyvos?fref=ts>), the Facebook page she manages, acts as a clearinghouse for her varied donation needs and an information center for advocates, reporters, and potential volunteers considering a visit to Lesbos.

Asked the same question, [Eric Kempson](#) (<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/blog/the-english-artist-helping-migrants-on-a-greek-island>) is somewhat more direct. "Because I'm a human being!" In the sixteen years since he moved from the United Kingdom to Efthalou, the next town over from Molyvos along [Lesvos'](#) (<http://www.dw.com/en/greek-island-community-finds-private-ways-to-help-refugees/a-18578098>) northern coast, Kempson has developed a unique knowledge of the trails that link the [cliff-side coastal roads](#) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXUuGu7B6XA>) to the

island's beaches. He spends his mornings on a hilltop near his home, [scanning the Aegean Sea for arriving skiffs](http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/06/22/416390001/on-a-greek-island-vacationers-lend-a-hand-to-migrants) (<http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/06/22/416390001/on-a-greek-island-vacationers-lend-a-hand-to-migrants>), and is often the first to [spot arriving boats, greet debarking refugees](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0KNchezVOko) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0KNchezVOko>), and provide them water, food, and guidance. Kempson's [frequent YouTube videos](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnPYqWbPl4OOCa7RHfSjhxw) (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnPYqWbPl4OOCa7RHfSjhxw>), which combine documentary-style reporting, political commentary, interviews, and appeals for help, have done much to raise the profile of the crisis in Lesvos. When not tending to [Ellenisworkshop](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Ellenisworkshop-Eric-Kempson/172010496146330?sk=app_259525164100619) (https://www.facebook.com/pages/Ellenisworkshop-Eric-Kempson/172010496146330?sk=app_259525164100619), the arts and crafts store they own, Eric's wife [Philippa usually accompanies him](http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/features/6551546/Expat-Brit-gives-aid-to-thousands-of-migrants-in-Greece.html). (<http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/features/6551546/Expat-Brit-gives-aid-to-thousands-of-migrants-in-Greece.html>). Arriving skiffs often carry whole families, and her presence is a welcome comfort to female refugees, especially if they need treatment for illness or injuries.

When a skiff arrives, McRostie and the Kempsons [organize convoys to shuttle refugees](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AlhKIH2Ja1I&feature=youtu.be) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AlhKIH2Ja1I&feature=youtu.be>) from the distant beaches where they land to the town of Molyvos. In Molyvos they will be able to board a bus to the port and registration center in Mytilene. Until mid-July of this year, arriving refugees had to walk the sixty kilometers from one town to the other on foot; during that stretch of time, Kempson helped [organize convoys all the way to Mytilene as well](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PLajMijieg) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PLajMijieg>). Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) (<http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/article/greece-thousands-migrants-and-asylum-seekers-stranded-precarious-conditions>) and the [United Nations High Commission for Refugees \(UNHCR\)](http://www.unhcr.org/5576bd836.html) (<http://www.unhcr.org/5576bd836.html>) began providing buses in mid-July, relieving some pressure on the Molyvos relief operation, though by no means resolving the crisis.

The refugees arriving in Greece are a diverse group. Some are old enough to remember all three Arab-Israeli Wars; others have yet to celebrate their first birthdays. Though some travel alone, war and persecution affect entire communities: many travel [with their families](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwuKMTX36A) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwuKMTX36A>), some even in the company of dozens of relatives. [Travel to Europe is dangerous—though evidently less so than staying behind](http://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2015/08/syrias-children/402583/) (<http://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2015/08/syrias-children/402583/>). Some refugees are young and able-bodied, but many others are elderly or disabled. [Pregnant women and the mothers of newborns](https://youtu.be/vx_i7wq9gk?t=1m9s) (https://youtu.be/vx_i7wq9gk?t=1m9s), along with children of all ages, are also a common sight. [Their needs upon arrival are immense](http://www.aftenposten.no/nvheter/uriks/Her-ankommer-flyktningene-den-greske-ferieoya-Lesvos-8132779.html#.VddvYVNuq1w.facebook) (<http://www.aftenposten.no/nvheter/uriks/Her-ankommer-flyktningene-den-greske-ferieoya-Lesvos-8132779.html#.VddvYVNuq1w.facebook>): nearly all are starving and parched after waiting between one and four days, without food or water, on Turkish shores for a boat to spirit them to Europe. Temperatures in Lesvos reach 100F during the summer, and depending on where they land, refugees may need to walk for hours before reaching the nearest town.

The needs of arriving refugees are also varied. Hunger and thirst are common, as is trauma. By the time they reach Greece, [most refugees have lost something, and some have lost everything](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/03/refugee-crisis-friends-and-family-fill-in-gaps-behind-harrowing-images) (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/03/refugee-crisis-friends-and-family-fill-in-gaps-behind-harrowing-images>). All have endured conflict and persecution, a long journey across numerous borders, and an hour-long maritime crossing on an [overcrowded and hardly seaworthy skiff](http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/9596592/lesbos-the-tourist-island-where-half-greeces-migrants-land/) (<http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/9596592/lesbos-the-tourist-island-where-half-greeces-migrants-land/>). During this crossing, refugees are vulnerable to assault by seafaring militias that [intercept skiffs during their crossing to beat, rob, and intimidate refugees](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/greek-migrant-boats-attacked_55cbaf1e4b0898c488664e6) (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/greek-migrant-boats-attacked_55cbaf1e4b0898c488664e6), sometimes [stealing their gasoline, removing their engines, sailing in circles around skiffs to destabilize them, or puncturing their inflatable hulls](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJjiZ44k_ew) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJjiZ44k_ew) in mid-crossing.

Local authorities and international agencies are present and quite active in Lesvos. UNHCR provides transportation and coordinates the efforts of various agencies; Médecins du Monde [soigne et témoigne \(heals and bears witness\)](http://www.medecinsdumonde.org/Bloc-news-Home/Migrants-en-Grece-Medecins-du-Monde-soigne-et-temoigne) (<http://www.medecinsdumonde.org/Bloc-news-Home/Migrants-en-Grece-Medecins-du-Monde-soigne-et-temoigne>), providing primary care in transit camps

near Mytilene. ShelterBox is [providing housing](http://www.shelterboxusa.org/news_global.php?id=1370) (http://www.shelterboxusa.org/news_global.php?id=1370) at the same camps; the International Rescue Committee [set up showers](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0-S-aFr8t1q) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0-S-aFr8t1q>) and [hired local contractors to clean up the camps](http://www.rescue.org/press-releases/international-rescue-committee-deploying-emergency-response-team-lesbos-greece-25402) (<http://www.rescue.org/press-releases/international-rescue-committee-deploying-emergency-response-team-lesbos-greece-25402>), while [advocating for refugees and appealing for aid](http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/jul/27/refugees-not-migrants-arriving-thousands-greece-shores?CMP=share_btn_tw) (http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/jul/27/refugees-not-migrants-arriving-thousands-greece-shores?CMP=share_btn_tw). MSF has [responders deployed across Greece's islands and mainland](http://www.msf.org/article/greece-thousands-migrants-and-asylum-seekers-stranded-precarious-conditions-across-islands#.Vb7hEqS_kA4.twitter) (http://www.msf.org/article/greece-thousands-migrants-and-asylum-seekers-stranded-precarious-conditions-across-islands#.Vb7hEqS_kA4.twitter) and [files candid reports from Greece](http://www.msf.org.uk/article/opinion-and-debate-we-are-europe-we-can-do-better) (<http://www.msf.org.uk/article/opinion-and-debate-we-are-europe-we-can-do-better>), while Amnesty International released a [thorough and wide-ranging report](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/08/chaos-and-squalid-conditions-face-record-number-of-refugees-on-lesvos/) (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/08/chaos-and-squalid-conditions-face-record-number-of-refugees-on-lesvos/>) on refugee arrivals in Lesbos. Local authorities, burdened as they are with Greece's economic crisis, do what they can. The Greek Coast Guard rescues refugees from sinking skiffs by the hundreds; Thanassis Andreotis, the mayor of Molyvos, [collects abandoned skiffs and discarded life jackets](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/08/greek-island-refugee-crisis-local-people-and-tourists-rally-round-migrants) (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/08/greek-island-refugee-crisis-local-people-and-tourists-rally-round-migrants>) from Lesbos' northern beaches multiple times a day; Mytelini's police [issue thousands of temporary residency permits each day](http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/8/10/balkan-borders-no-obstacle-to-refugees-fleeing-conflicts.html) (<http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/8/10/balkan-borders-no-obstacle-to-refugees-fleeing-conflicts.html>). The University of the Aegean, with facilities in Lesbos and in several other Greek islands on the front lines of the ongoing refugee crisis, [has announced its intention to enroll refugees](http://greece.greekreporter.com/2015/08/04/the-greek-aegean-university-could-soon-enroll-refugees/) (<http://greece.greekreporter.com/2015/08/04/the-greek-aegean-university-could-soon-enroll-refugees/>). Reporters [bear witness](http://www.vice.com/read/i-spent-the-day-at-a-greek-refugee-camp-504) (<http://www.vice.com/read/i-spent-the-day-at-a-greek-refugee-camp-504>) and [provide volunteers with platforms to share information](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/03/migration-crisis-how-are-you-supporting-people-refugees) (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/03/migration-crisis-how-are-you-supporting-people-refugees>).

Yet, for all this activity, the only relief providers in and around Molyvos are volunteers. Their [efforts are commendable and their commitment runs deep](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RPVTsjoEED8) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RPVTsjoEED8>); they work long hours under a searing sun and stop helping only if they run out of supplies. Yet this ad hoc response, try though it may, [can hardly keep up](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ioCAoA_9tW0) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ioCAoA_9tW0). It depends entirely on individual efforts and private donations, both of which are irregular and unpredictable. The tasks required of volunteers are numerous, fluid, and evolving: managing communications and appealing for donations; preparing, storing, and distributing food; sequencing the arrival of refugees at collection points and their boarding onto buses; communicating basic advice and direction in a variety of foreign languages; cleaning up deflated hulls of inflatable boats and discarded life jackets littered across landing beaches. They carry out these tasks in the absence of trained professionals, technology and hardware, in some cases even in the absence of [cooperation from local authorities](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=alkiKVamVG8) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=alkiKVamVG8>). Volunteers shuttle refugees around in compact rental cars, though minibuses would be better suited to the task; they distribute water bottles, though cisterns, if they were available, would be more efficient; they spend their own savings or must secure private donations to finance their efforts in support of refugees. Turnover is high, as is the loss of organizational knowledge. As Kempson repeats ad nauseam in his videos and to the press: "[we really need some help](http://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/greek-island-gateway-to-eu-as-thousands-flee-homelands-1.2239042)" (<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/greek-island-gateway-to-eu-as-thousands-flee-homelands-1.2239042>).

Absent a professional humanitarian response, McRostie and Kempson have nonetheless provided near-constant coverage of Lesbos' northern coast for six months and counting—no small feat. They have kept refugees fed and hydrated by the thousands, and, by putting toys in the hands of children and playing cards in those of adults, offered refugees a modicum of the happiness they thought they were pursuing when they fled to Europe. Lesbos' humanitarianism without humanitarians is worthy of recognition, but it desperately needs the professional attention, resources and organizational processes to maintain, if not improve its functioning and sustainability.

Specifically, volunteers need the assistance of a permanent detail of medical professionals, able to provide first aid, basic pediatric and obstetric

care, and socio-psychological services, as well as manage a robust referral system for refugees requiring more thorough treatment. They need translators fluent in Arabic, Dari, and Greek—though many refugees arrive with a strong grasp of English, their assistance alone is insufficient to communicate complex instructions to large groups of refugees. Hydrological engineers, with the cooperation of local residents and authorities, could set up and maintain water points along Lesvos' northern roads, which would do much to reduce the accumulation of trash along refugees' paths. Legal advocates capable of explaining the intricacies of European asylum law, and social workers capable of giving refugees a broad understanding of available welfare mechanisms, could alleviate the stress and uncertainty felt by refugees, and help them develop nuanced and realistic expectations of their arrival in Europe.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, international humanitarian organizations and foreign governments have much to learn from the situation in Molyvos. Despite existing, and somewhat inevitable tensions within the community, Lesvos has not seen the [use of force deployed in Macedonia](http://www.newsweek.com/macedonia-uses-tear-gas-stun-grenades-refugees-trying-leave-greece-365053) (<http://www.newsweek.com/macedonia-uses-tear-gas-stun-grenades-refugees-trying-leave-greece-365053>), the [building of fences erected in Hungary](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/26/hungary-migrants-razor-wire-fence-roszke?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Twitter) (http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/26/hungary-migrants-razor-wire-fence-roszke?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Twitter), or the [tragic loss of dozens of arriving refugees due to criminal neglect of smugglers](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/refugees-suffocate-dead-truck-austria_55defe14e4b08dc094867ca8) (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/refugees-suffocate-dead-truck-austria_55defe14e4b08dc094867ca8), as seen in Austria. However limited their resources, McRostie, Kempson, and their odd crew of volunteers have preserved social order in Molyvos and channeled refugees in and out of the community in an organized fashion while minimizing adverse impacts on the local infrastructure and economy. Given the immense number of refugees and the small number of volunteers, this is no small accomplishment.

Yet, as [pressure rises in other parts of Lesvos](http://greece.greekreporter.com/2015/09/04/refugee-situation-out-of-control-says-greek-island-mayor-video/) (<http://greece.greekreporter.com/2015/09/04/refugee-situation-out-of-control-says-greek-island-mayor-video/>), unassisted volunteers can only do so much, and so long as Syria, Afghanistan and other countries remain mired in conflict, refugees from across the world will continue seeking protection in Europe. If the summer of 2015 has proved a shocking departure from the previous trickle of migrant and refugee arrivals in Lesvos, the summer of 2016—barring a unlikely transformation in global conflict and strife—is likelier to see an increase than a decrease in arrivals. McRostie and Kempson's Molyvos operation has developed a solid grasp on refugees' arrival points; ingress and egress flows; immediate, medium-term, and long-term needs; and common medical, socio-psychological, and legal problems. They have developed battle-tested infrastructure and entrenched best practices while attracting a constantly-renewing workforce of driven volunteers. From this core, a solid edifice can be built. The humanitarianism without humanitarians established in Lesvos deserves study and emulation as an ad hoc model for refugee assistance operations. As of now, it struggles as a fledgling experiment in good Samaritanism sustained by pluck and perseverance instead of needed organization and resources. Just as urgently needed is a European political, institutional, and organizational response worthy of the grassroots efforts underfoot.

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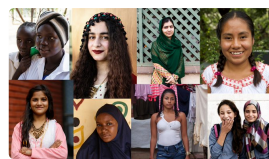
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